

At The Exploratorium

In The
McBean Theater

Fall '88

SPEAKING OF MUSIC

With human perception as its central theme, the Exploratorium has always used the insights of both scientists and artists to establish notions of how one sees, knows and understands the world. The Exploratorium's SPEAKING OF MUSIC series is one of many programs here that seeks to discover why things are the way they are: how an artist, as well as a scientist, or oneself, probes, investigates, interprets nature, and makes decisions. As with everything else at the Exploratorium, participation is the key, so we encourage you to ask questions of our guests.

SPEAKING OF MUSIC is made possible with the support of the California Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, Meet the Composer/California, and Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund.

SPEAKING OF MUSIC has been an ongoing presentation of the Exploratorium since 1972.

LEO ORNSTEIN: PIONEER OF AMERICAN MUSIC
with pianist **MARTHA ANNE VERBIT**

20 OCTOBER 1988 8:00 P.M.
also featuring pianist Marvin Tartak

We regret that Mr. Ornstein could not be here with us in person this evening. Instead, we will talk with him live by telephone to his home in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and view videotapes of his recent 95th birthday celebration at St. Norbert's College there and of an interview done by Vivian Perlis for the Oral History Collection of the Yale University School of Music. We will, however, have two guest pianists onstage tonight. The first is one of America's most talented and adventurous performers, Martha Anne Verbit. A native of Georgia, she lives in Boston and is known for her performances and recordings of unusual repertoire of early and late 20th Century music. Her recording of Ornstein's Fourth Piano Sonata was released on Genesis Records and she recently recorded the Valentine Waltzes of George Antheil which she performed in 1987 at Carnegie Hall. Marvin Tartak holds a doctorate from U.C. Berkeley and has given numerous Northern California premieres of works by some of the most challenging figures in modern music including Roger Sessions, Elliott Carter, Seymour Shifrin and Gyorgy Kurtag. He teaches at San Francisco City College.

LEO ORNSTEIN was born December 2, 1892, in Kremenchug, Russia. Ornstein's father, a cantor, taught gave his son basic musical training which was followed by formal study at the Petrograd Conservatory. The family, victimized by the frequent pogroms against Jews at the turn of the Century, left Russia, and in 1907 settled in New York City. Ornstein studied at the Institute of Musical Art with Bertha Fiering Tapper who was a strong influence on the young musician. After a debut recital in 1911 in NY, and European tours in 1913 and 1914, Ornstein's fame as a pianist and subsequently a composer grew. In 1913 he composed *Danse Sauvage* (or *Wild Men's Dance*), one of his earliest modernist pieces. This and other radical pieces made him the center of violent controversy in the musical press. And in 1915 at the Band Box Theatre in New York, Ornstein presented an historic series of four concerts which included the American premieres of music by Ravel (*Gaspard de la Nuit*, *Sonatine*, *Miroirs*), Schoenberg (*Piano Pieces*, Opp. 11 & 19), Scriabin, Stravinsky, Busoni, and Bartok. In a 1918 biography, *Leo Ornstein: The Man, His Ideas, His Work*, Frederick H. Martens began, "Leo Ornstein to many represents an evil musical genius wandering without the utmost pale of tonal orthodoxy, in a weird No-Man's Land haunted with tortuous sound, with wails of futuristic despair, with cubist shrieks and post-impressionistic cries and crashes. He is the great anarchist, the iconoclast, the destructive genius who would root out what little remains of the law and the prophets since Scriabin, Stravinsky and Schoenberg have trampled them underfoot."

In 1920, at the height of his fame, Ornstein abruptly retired from the concert stage and became a respected teacher of younger pianists, founding the Ornstein School of Music in Philadelphia. In the Fifties he retired to North Conway, New Hampshire, and in the Eighties lived in Brownsville, Texas, for some time. In 1972, KPFA Radio in Berkeley presented a revival of his music, none of which then was commercially recorded. This stimulated others to do the same and the composer thereafter began to write music once again.

Tonight we will hear Martha Anne Verbit read a recent letter from the composer and perform "A la chinoise" and the Sonata No. 4 for Piano. This will be followed by a recent 7-minute video feature on the composer, a live telephone call with Mr. Ornstein, and an introduction to the composer's most recent music, the Sonata No. 7 for Piano, with Marvin Tartak at the piano. Mr. Tartak will give the world premiere of this piece on a concert of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players on November 7, 1988.

Our thanks to the San Francisco Piano Gallery and Baldwin Pianos for providing tonight's instrument. Martha Anne Verbit is a Baldwin artist. **HOST & PRODUCER: CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN.**